

An Easter Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ
March 23, 2008
Rev. T. Michael Rock

Scripture Readings: Matthew 28:1-10 and Acts 10"34-43

Sermon Title: Judging the Living and the Dead

(open with prayer)

Easter sermons are funny creatures. The occasion to speak to a large crowd is often rare, so it's like we need to make this one count. What gets in the way too often is the desire to make people feel good, for every preacher is faced on any given Sunday with a choice to her or his message. What is role the preacher needs to take? Is it the pastoral role, walking with the people and accompanying them through a story that few of us understand? Is it the Priestly role, claiming the sacred and the ritual of this holy mystery? Or, is it the prophetic role, the role that tells the hard truths that maybe, just maybe, we don't want to hear. Especially if we come to church just once a year. I assume the last thing you want to hear is a prophetic sermon about judgment.

This is my predicament as I poured over many of your question and concerns about Trinity United Church of Christ and its former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright during this Holy Week. So, its OK if you have to pretend to go the bathroom or check on your child. It's OK if you came only wanting to hear assurance and love. Feel free to take care of yourself, because we are going to delve into a little of the African American tradition of prophetic preaching. I will not, however, preach for over 40 minutes.

We have to remember first and foremost that the role of the prophet is to, "point out the disparity between the finite rule of kings and nations, and the everlasting rule of God." – Abraham Heschel. On the south side of Chicago, Rev. Wright spent many days and nights walking the streets around Trinity UCC. He was all too aware that even in his black middle class congregation that one in every six black teenage males would see the inside of a prison. He was very aware, even as he raised millions in Capital Campaigns to keep the ministry moving forward that 75% of those young men would visit prison a second or third time. He was aware that every Sunday the Chicago Police would pull over some of his congregants because they were driving while

black. There was no hiding from Rev. Wright or his congregation the state of the crumbling schools on the South Side, and he was smart enough to understand that in this country four people are shot and killed every day. Three and a half of them are black. Rev. Wright was worried about his congregation and he remembered this universal truth, for he repeated it almost every Sunday. When you give yourself to Christ you become a citizen of the world. When you give yourself to Christ you become a citizen of the world. When you give yourself to Christ you become a servant, not of any finite king or nation, you become a servant of the everlasting God. This would be the time in the sermon when Rev. Wright would perform an altar call and ask people to come forward to make that commitment. I need everyone to relax a little, because I am not going to do that. But, if you feel moved to make this commitment, see me after worship.

Every Sunday Rev. Wright would ask in his prayers to people to respond to the “persuasiveness of the Holy Spirit.” In Rev. Wright’s ministry at Trinity United Church of Christ, over 60 souls went on to graduate study in preparation for ministry, and hundreds left their lives in the corporate world for the servanthood of nonprofit ministry. This is a question for you regulars, how many times have I said in this pulpit that my ministry is about supporting your call to serve in whatever way? I didn’t think about this out of thin air. It came to me as a teenager and the few times I sat in the pews at Trinity United Church of Christ. When I responded to the persuasiveness of the Holy Spirit, I looked for those lessons that were most important to me as a person called to serve a congregation. Rev. Wright’s words were easy to remember. Everyone is called to service, not to a finite king or nation, but to our everlasting God. So, it is this context that I hear the words, “Not God Bless America, but God Damn America,” I’m sure that in that post 9/11 congregation, many people were in disagreement with Rev. Wright about his choice of words, but I doubt that anyone in the congregation who lives everyday with the scourge of racism beating down their necks disagreed with Rev. Wright. I doubt that anyone who has lived in a country that spends billions on bombs and forgets the homeless and poor disagreed with Rev. Wright. I doubt that anyone who is brought up in a culture of fear, yet understands their role as a citizen of the world disagreed with Rev. Wright. Being a Christian and a citizen of the world allows for this kind of truth-telling. Rev. Wright is not being anti-American and more than the prophets of in the Hebrew scriptures were being anti-Israel. The truth is that God shows no partiality, no nationhood, no division of race,

class, or ability. God desires wholeness and when one looks around and sees people freezing to death because there is not enough housing, or starving because there is not enough food, especially in the richest country in the world, the prophet has to step up and take notice.

When Jesus rose from the dead and walked again, he didn't hold a press conference or make a speech. Instead, he told the disciples to return home and there they will see. Jesus asked for a show of faith. Jesus will meet us at home. Not in a sanctuary on Easter morning, but at home. This is the ultimate reminder that all church is about you and how you live your lives at home. Jesus will meet you at home. That is where your lives are changed. Easter happens when we face the empty tomb and remember that "He is not here!" Our search for Jesus is fulfilled when we return home. That is where we understand Easter. The church is here to support, strengthen and challenge your ministry outside these walls. That is where we understand Jesus as being judge of the living and the dead. Jesus is the judge. This thought appears throughout scripture. It is either a source of comfort or fear for us. For a kid who spent a lot of time in the principle's office, this is not all that comfortable a proposition. Jesus is the judge, but not the kind of judge that we have in our broken judicial system. The kind of justice that Jesus judges is not about punishment. Our God of love and wonder does not want you to suffer. Our God wants you to be whole, so Jesus doesn't deal in retributive justice in the American style, but restorative justice. Jesus will bring us together at a table with our enemies and restore us to wholeness. Jesus will take us to a place where there are no secrets and demand that we listen to those we have oppressed. Jesus wants to restore us and make us whole. Judgment on this Easter is not about winners and losers, it is about hope and vision and reconciliation. Jesus helps us to tell the truth, and sometimes that truth is hard to hear. Rev. Wright told the truth in those sermons. I cannot and will not apologize for a preacher who seeks, not punishment or retribution for America, but restoration for America. We can do better, we must do better, the path to better starts right here on Easter morning when we face the truth and realize that Jesus is judge of both the living and the dead. When we touch the impossibility that Jesus suffered, died and rose again, we begin to understand just how far Jesus would go to save our souls. By descending to Hades for three days, Jesus touched the realm of the dead and reminds us that not even death will stop Jesus from seeking our restoration. Nothing separates us from the love of God in Jesus, not height nor depth, nor angels, nor power, nor principalities,

nothing separates us from the love and restorative power of Jesus. This is Easter morning, and on this morning we celebrate light breaking through the darkness. This is Easter morning, and on this morning we celebrate our ability to listen even if the words give us discomfort. This is Easter morning, and on this morning we celebrate a judge of restoration, not retribution. This is Easter morning, and on this morning we prepare ourselves to greeting Jesus when we get home. This is Easter morning, and on this morning we will learn how to love in a new way. Let us thank God for Easter morning. AMEN.